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ABSTRACT

This study examined the various reasons that motivated district superintendents to leave their 1987-88 positions. The analysis was drawn from a survey of 27 superintendents who had resigned from their current positions. Respondents (N=24) indicated a moderate to high degree of pressure from school boards. All respondents, except one, did not identify implementing the Education Improvement Act as having a strong influence on their decisions to resign. The retirement incentive had little influence on resignation decisions. There appeared to be some relationship between number of years in the superintendency, age of the respondent, and moving to a position with more attractive benefits. Those with 11-14 years of superintendency experience indicated they were moving to a position with more attractive benefits. (3 references) (SI)

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The Exodus of South Carolina Superintendents

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ABSTRACT

THE EXODUS OF SOUTH CAROLINA SUPERINTENDENTS

"The Exodus of South Carolina Superintendents" analyzes the 1987-1988 exodus of school superintendents in the state. As of July 12, 1988, 35 percent of the state's superintendents had retired, changed jobs, or left their jobs by request. This exodus, percentage-wise, was the highest in any given year. However, it merely peaked the preceding four-year trend, which paralleled the State Legislature passing and implementing the Educational Improvement Act (EIA) of 1984. Specifically, this research attempts to identify and to understand the various reasons which motivated district superintendents to leave their 1987-1988 positions.

The analysis was drawn from a survey of those superintendents who had resigned from their current positions as of July 12, 1988. It was designed to measure the degree to which several factors motivated their decision to resign, e.g., pressure from the Board and its interference with administrative functions, implementing EIA, poorly qualified personnel support, the State Retirement Incentive Plan. The survey also examined other characteristics of the exiting superintendents such as sex,

race, length of tenure, highest degree earned, areas of expertise as well as those of their successors.

The following findings are among those which are significant in terms of identifying those superintendents who had resigned from South Carolina's school districts by July 12, 1988:

- Pressure from the Board and its interference with administrative functions was the only factor superintendents identified as exerting moderate to high influence on resignation decisions.
- Black superintendents felt that pressure from parents and other community leaders had greater influence on their decision than did white superintendents.
- Those superintendents whose area of expertise was finance felt greater pressure from parents and community leaders than did those who were generalists.
- Implementing EIA, per se, had little influnece on resignation decisions.
- Overall, the State Retirement Incentive Plan had little influence on resignation decisions.
- Those superintendents having 11-15 years experience tended to leave for a more attractive position more than those with both more and fewer years experience.

These findings are important not only for the impact they will have on the state's school districts, but to future decisions of state educators and policy-makers. They are also important to neighboring states, e.g., Georgia and North Carolina, who have recently implemented state-wide educational reform, and, to some degree, are also experiencing an exodus of their superintendents.

THE EXODUS OF SOUTH CAROLINA SUPERINTENDENTS

Introduction

This study analyzes the current exodus of South Carolina superintendents. The reasons for this exodus are important not only for the immediate impact they will have on the state's school districts but to future decisions of state educators and policy-makers alike. A brief discussion of this point is essential at the onset.

The Exodus

As of July 1, 1988, 27 of the 91 South Carolina superintendents had left their current positions, e.g., retired, changed jobs, or left by board request; two had died during the year. Three more superintendents had resigned by July 12, but one immediately returned to his previous position. This represented 35% of the state's superintendents. The 1987-88 exodus was, percentage-wise, the highest in any given year.

Although this current exodus was exceptionally high, it merely peaked the past four-year trend in the state. Between 1984 and 1988, over three-fourths of the state's school districts had changed superintendents.

Nationally, superintendents' average tenure is five years. From 1970-1988, the average superintendency in South Carolina was six years. However, the state's average from 1984 to present is slightly less than three years, close to the median (four) and the mode (three). Thus, 78%

of the state's school districts are now headed by individuals whose experience in their current districts ranges from zero to four years.

Should this trend continue (and signs indicate that it will), a significant majority of South Carolina's superintendents will be neophytes in districts where their predecessors had either been forced out by boards of education or chose to move to another superintendency either in- or out-of-state.

Background

Historically, South Carolina has experienced severe problems with its educational quality, exceeded only by those of Mississippi. Prior to 1987, these two states vied nationally for last place on the educational quality ladder, which was determined by student achievement on standardized tests. To solve this problem, the State Legislature passed the Educational Improvement Act (EIA) in 1984, and amended it in 1985 and 1986. Although most states have passed educational reform legislation within the past three to five years, only nine (including South Carolina) have legislated comprehensive reforms which impacted on all aspects of education, e.g., teacher, students, administrators, and parents (Jennings, 1988).

Education Improvement Act (1984)

Reform which is this wide-reaching mandates change; change creates conflict. Among these changes was the demand for accountability from all school personnel except boards.

This accountability, coupled with pressures from the various segments of the community-- boards, parents, businesses, and industries - created a chaotic climate. Thus, superintendents, the chief administrators, found themselves immersed in internal and external turmoil. They could either lead their districts to productivity or flee. But leaving, or fleeing, does not imply that these individuals were not effective leaders. Rather, it may suggest that other forces exerted more power, e.g., boards, parents, community.

EIA attacked raising student performance through far-reaching mandates such as the following:

- Increasing academic standards.
- Strengthening student discipline and daily attendance.
- Increasing the effective use of classroom time (including a longer school day, starting kindergarten programs for five-year olds and some four-year olds).
- Establishing advanced placement courses for academically talented students as well as gifted and talented programs at the elementary and secondary level.
- Requiring programs for handicapped students as well as compensatory and remedial programs.
- Requiring students to pass an exit exam to graduate.
- Raising teachers' salaries to attract and to hold qualified persons plus developing state-wide incentive programs.

Principals, as well as teachers and students, were affected by EIA's mandates, which included:

- Recruiting the most able candidates to become principals and coordinators.
- Developing and implementing a principal incentive program.
- Improving the training and evaluation of prospective and current school administrators.

EIA also targeted goals for individual schools and school districts by implementing strict quality controls and rewarding productivity, such as:

- Evaluating and rewarding schools and school districts based on measurable performance and progress.
- Focusing the planning of schools and school districts on instructional improvement and using resources effectively.

Additionally, under EIA, the state could declare those districts whose performance did not meet the prescribed level "impaired." Impairment could result in the following State Board of Education actions:

- Declaring a state of emergency in the school district.
- Furnishing continuing advice and technical assistance to implement the State Board's recommendations.
- Recommending to the Governor that the office of superintendent be declared vacant, operating with an interim until the Board of Trustees hired a new superintendent.

During the first year of EIA, the State Board declared six districts impaired; to date, nine districts have been

declared impaired since that first year with one being declared twice. Four superintendents from districts which had been impaired were among those who resigned in the Spring of 1988 (one was from the district placed on impairment twice).

These EIA mandated changes, especially the graduation exit exam requirement and the impairment stigma, or even the possibility of impairment, put varying amounts of pressure on school districts' performance as well as the districts' superintendents. Board members, parents, and district residents were concerned with the district's overall image as well as their students' education.

The 1987-88 school year dawned with a renewed spirit for some districts. South Carolina witnessed the first significant state-wide rise in student achievement scores (conversation with Dr. John May, Chief Supervisor, Quality Assessment Section, Office of School District Accreditation and Assessment, State Department of Education, Columbia, South Carolina, November 10, 1988), which the State Department of Education attributed to the effects of educational reform, i.e., EIA. Nationally, South Carolina had moved to second to last place in student achievement scores. Teacher and student attendance has also risen during the four-year period. For the first time since EIA had been implemented, the State did not declare any district impaired.

However, not all districts had met their prescribed achievement gains. The EIA mandates were not relaxed. But

the level of state funding to support these mandates decreased. Many districts were not prepared to assume the financial burden that resulted from implementing EIA. Referendums, for the most part, were not successful. Also, coupled with, or emanating from, the demands of educational reform were many idiosyncratic demands from local school boards.

School Boards

Local school boards, as they exist in our culture, are a somewhat unique phenomena. Boards are charged with setting district policy. Yet, this responsibility requires no qualifications, other than being a registered voter in the district, for those who assume it. Nor does it require any preparation or training to serve. Interestingly, both superintendents and board members ranked role and responsibility as the areas in which the board members need training (Stuckey, 1988). Once elected or appointed, school board members enjoy a high degree of autonomy.

However, the guidelines governing school boards' powers are somewhat nebulous, and, therefore, difficult to monitor or restrict. Thus, the temptation to usurp the superintendent's administrative duties is always present. In fact, in many districts, the separation of policy-making from policy administration does not exist in practice. Many boards seek to administer those policies they effect.

Traditionally, local South Carolina boards of education were appointed. Currently, only 12% are appointed, either by

legislative delegation, by county school boards, or some combination of appointed and elected members. Statewide, the trend has been toward elected school boards. District residents currently elect 88% of their boards.

Change, pressure, and insufficient funds characterized the 1984-1988 period. District superintendents bore the major responsibility for meeting EIA mandates in their districts, frequently being charged to meet unrealistic State Department and local school board demands. Then, in Spring, 1988, the State implemented an employee retirement incentive plan, effective July 1, 1988.

State Retirement Incentive

Public employees retirement qualifications in South Carolina, as in other states, are based on years' service. In May, 1988, the State increased monthly retirement benefits by 10%. Additionally, those who retired by June 30, would receive another one-time 10% bonus. Also, those who retired would not have to pay the 1988-89 employee pension contribution increase.

Many superintendents' resignations occurred after the State announced the retirement incentive. On the surface, these two events appeared to be causally related. That the retirement incentive had, indeed, influenced those who had the required years' service in their decision to retire was not illogical. But to assume that one of many factors is primarily responsible for the decisions of several individuals is taking a simplistic view of the world. Thus,

this study was designed to learn how important several factors were in the 27 superintendents' decisions to resign from their positions. Additionally, the study sought information about the resigning superintendents as well as information about their successors, e.g., area of expertise, highest degree earned, total number of years served in the superintendency.

Instrument Design

The researchers developed a questionnaire to collect the data for this study. The instrument contained eight statements reflecting the opinions of the respondents regarding factors influencing their decisions to resign from their present superintendencies. Seven of the items solicited a response on a Likert-type scale designated by high (5), less than high (4), moderate (3), less than moderate (2), and low (1). The remaining item was open to individual comments from the respondents. A high score suggests a highly favorable opinion or agreement while a low score, the opposite.

The items for this instrument were derived from the interaction of the researchers with education administrators across the state.

Population and Data Collection

The researchers mailed the survey questionnaire, a cover letter, and a return, self-addressed envelope to the 27 superintendents who had resigned. The respondents were asked to return the questionnaires by a designated date. Seventy

percent returned the questionnaires after the first mailing. A second mailing netted six additional returns. Thus, the total response was 88.8%.

Demographic Data

Of the 24 respondents, 21 (87.5%) were male; 3 (12.5%) female. Three (12.5%) were black; 21 (87.5%) white. Ages ranged from under 45 to 1 over 65. The majority of the respondents held doctor's degrees as did their successors. Also, the majority identified their area of expertise as general (78.9%). The average total number of years as a superintendent was 12.64, with an average of 8.18 years in their current districts. Eleven of the 24 respondents (45.8%) indicated that, at that point in time, they planned to retire, while 7 (29.2%) indicated they were moving to a parallel position (See Table 1, p.10).

Table 1

Summary of Respondent Demographic Data

Survey Item	N	Percent	Valid Percent
Sex			
Male	21	87.5	87.5
Female	3	12.5	12.5
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Race			
White	21	87.5	87.5
Black	3	12.5	12.5
Other	--	--	--
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Age Range			
Under 45	5	20.8	20.8
46 - 50	3	12.5	12.5
51 - 55	4	16.7	16.7
55 - 60	4	16.7	16.7
61 - 65	7	29.2	29.7
Over 65	1	4.2	4.2
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0

Table 1 (continued)

Summary of Respondent Demographic Data

Survey Item	N	Percent	Valid Percent
Highest Degree Earned			
B.S.			
Masters	3	12.5	12.5
Specialist	8	33.3	33.3
Doctorate	13	54.2	54.2
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Highest Degree Earned by Successor			
B.S.	2	8.3	10.5
Masters	3	12.5	15.8
Specialist	1	4.2	5.3
Doctorate	13	54.2	68.4
Missing	5	20.8	Missing
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Administrative Area of Expertise			
General	19	79.2	86.4
Curriculum/Instruction	1	8.3	4.5
Finance	2	4.2	9.1
Missing	2	8.3	Missing
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0

Table 1 (continued)

Summary of Respondent Demographic Data

Survey Item	N	Percent	Valid Percent
Total Years as Superintendent			
5 or less	7	29.2	29.2
6 -10	5	20.8	20.8
11-15	3	12.5	12.5
15-20	5	20.8	20.8
20-25	0	--	--
25-30	4	16.7	16.7
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Total Years in District			
1 - 5	8	33.3	36.4
6 -10	6	25.0	27.3
11-15	3	12.5	13.6
16-20	5	20.8	22.7
	2	8.3	Missing
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0
Future Plans			
parallel position	7	29.2	29.2
diff. position within pub. ed.	4	16.7	16.7
position within priv. sect.	2	8.3	8.3
retirement	11	45.8	45.8
TOTAL	24	100.0	100.0

Findings

Respondents indicated a moderate to high degree of pressure from school boards. Thirteen of the twenty-two (59%) who responded to this item indicated that pressure from the Board and its interference with administrative functions influenced their decisions to resign from their present superintendencies. Thirty-six point four percent indicated a high degree of pressure from the board. As a matter of fact, the only factor consistently cited by the respondents to the open-ended question related to concerns about board pressure.

All respondents, except one, did not identify implementing EIA as having a strong influence on their decisions to resign. Sixty-eight point two percent indicated that it had from a low to less than moderate impact on their decision.

The retirement incentive, apparently, had little influence on resignation decisions. Eleven respondents indicated that they were retiring. Of these 11, 6 (54.5%) were only moderately influenced by the incentive; all of these (100%) also indicated that board pressures and their interference with administrative functions had a high degree of influence on their decisions; 45.5% indicated the incentive did not influence their decisions.

Parent pressure, laws other than EIA, poor personnel support and a position with more attractive benefits had

little influence on resignation decisions. More than 60% indicated low influence; 81% low to moderate influence.

There appears to be some relationship between number of years in the superintendency, age of the respondent and moving to a position with more attractive benefits. Those with 11-15 years superintendency experience indicated they were moving to a position with more attractive benefits. (See Table 2, p. 15)

Table 2

Summary of Responses to 7 Issues

Likert Scale: 1 - low
3 - moderate
5 - high

NUMBER (%/VALID %)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	MISSING
1. Pressure from parents and other community leaders.	14(58.3/66.7)	2(8.3/9.5)	3(12.5/14.3)	1(4.2/4.8)	1(4.2/4.8)	3(12.5/Missing)
2. Implementation of EIA.	14(58.3/63.6)	1(4.2/4.5)	2(8.3/9.1)	2(8.3/9.1)	3(12.5/13.6)	2(8.3/Missing)
3. Implementation of other laws.	14(58.3/66.7)	1(4.2/4.8)	1(4.2/4.8)	4(16.7/19.0)	1(4.2/4.8)	3(12.4/Missing)
4. Pressure from the Board and its interference with the administrative functions.	9(37.5/40.9)	---	2(8.3/9.1)	3(12.5/13.6)	8(33.3/36.4)	2(8.3/Missing)
5. Poorly qualified personnel support.	16(66.7/76.2)	1(4.2/4.8)	3(12.5/14.3)	---	1(4.2/4.8)	3(12.5/Missing)
6. A position with more attractive benefits.	12(50.0/60.0)	1(4.2/5.0)	1(4.2/5.0)	2(8.3/10.0)	4(16.7/20.0)	4(16.7/Missing)
7. To what degree did the recent retirement incentive influence your decision.	17(70.8/73.9)	---	4(16.7/17.4)	1(4.2/4.3)	4(4.2/4.3)	1(4.2/Missing)

Summary/Conclusion

Pressure from the board and its interference with administrative functions was the only factor that superintendents felt had significant influence on their resignation decisions. They did not even see the state retirement incentive plan as having a moderate impact on these decisions.

Thirty-five percent of the school superintendents resigned during the 1987-88 year, and over three-fourths resigned between 1984-88 (the years during which the State implemented the Educational Improvement Act. Thus, most districts are currently headed by superintendents who are neophytes at least in their current districts. Whether or not EIA indirectly impacted on district school boards, putting undue pressure on superintendents and interfering with administrative functions, is another question-one which a future study might address. However, whether board pressure and interference is real or perceived, it is an issue which state educators and policy-makers must address in the future. Reform cannot exist without implementers. If those implementers are impeded in their efforts, reform may become counter-productive.

Recommendations

Completing this research strongly supported its need. These findings identified those reasons the superintendents felt had the greatest influence on their resignations from their current superintendences. Indirectly, this research suggests that neophyte superintendents are leading this reform state.

Topics for further research might include for following:

- Surveying the perceptions of school board members regarding the exodus of superintendents
- Investigating current activities of the superintendents who resigned
- Determining if similar correlations exist in other reform states
- Comparing the perceptions of those superintendents who resigned with those of superintendents who did not resign.

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